

# Medical Library Services

## Innovations in Washington

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AT THE CLOSE of the last century, Seattle's physicians, recognizing both their geographic isolation and the absence of scholarly resources (books and journals), founded the area's first medical library. Almost immediately they also founded a medical journal, *Northwest Medicine*, which was to serve as the official state medical journal for Washington, Oregon and Idaho during the next half century. Not the least of the journal's goals was that of attracting journals and new books to the newly founded library at no cost through its book review section and its reciprocal complimentary subscription program.

As hoped, the library, the journal—and the region—grew and prospered. Eventually, the more than 25,000 volume library was brought under the jurisdiction of Seattle's King County Medical Society (KCMS). Located in a large office building in the center of the downtown community, it shared space with the medical society offices. It proved ideally accessible to many specialists in the building and in the immediate neighborhood.

But times change. The area burgeoned; physicians migrated to the suburbs. Suddenly, in 1971, the rent for the library space soared from \$1 a year to \$2,000 a month—making the rental budget larger than the library's total operational budget. Fortunately, discussions had already been held about alternatives for the library's long-range future. Several of the community's larger hospitals had been building commendable collections and the University of Washington's Health Sciences Library had emerged on the scene as an active coordinating, collaborating resource to the

region's health practitioners. But nothing really happened until the rent went up. At that point the King County Medical Society's library committee and its Board of Trustees began vigorous discussions with the University of Washington about still further collaboration; these culminated successfully in February 1971 when KCMS—first transferring some of its unique references to the University of Washington—put its library holdings in storage. Simultaneously, KCMS entered into a contractual arrangement with the University and stationed its librarian on the University premises. Using a special telephone and the University's collection, and with access to photocopy capability, the librarian services the membership's library needs. She completes MEDLINE, SDILINE, TOXLINE and other National Library of Medicine bibliographic searches, photocopies articles and handles other reference requests.

During the ensuing three years more than half of the Society's membership availed themselves of the new service—at a rate five times that of previous usage. By careful attention to effective and efficient service, the librarian has drawn accolades; and the cost of the program continues at \$15 per member per year. To help plan for the future, the librarian, Ms. Barber, using simple postcards, has conducted a continuing survey of the members' opinions about the service and the use to which they are putting it in their individual practices. Results of the latest tally (March 1974 to March 1975) show more than 65 percent of the requests stem from patient care problems; the remainder have to do with continuing education needs, research activities, public information programs and so forth. Moreover, more than 95 percent of the respondents indicate the service has satisfied their specific needs and always within a reasonable time span.

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Elsewhere in Washington, Spokane's physicians also founded a medical library early in this century. Lacking any formal health education institutions, the Spokane Medical Library, founded in 1929, and the Sacred Heart Hospital Library have provided the backbone of services for the "Inland Empire." Similarly, physicians in Tacoma developed their own library in 1967. Recently, they took the lead in "regionalizing" their resources by jointly employing a librarian on behalf of their medical society and several hospitals. She maintains the county society's collection along with Tacoma General Hospital's collection in one location and oversees the other community hospitals' collections, assuring maximum access and efficiency to the members.<sup>1</sup>

With the emergence on the national scene of "Your National Library of Medicine"<sup>2</sup> and the development of our five-state Pacific Northwest Regional Health Sciences Library, it became even more obvious that although physicians in our three urban areas enjoyed excellent library services, those located elsewhere in the State were "disadvantaged." To respond to that need, the Washington State Medical Association (WSMA), in cooperation with the University of Washington, initiated a statewide service available to all of its members regardless of geographic location. Today, any member physician can write or simply telephone on a toll-free telephone line to submit a request. The WSMA librarian, also stationed at the University of Washington's Health Sciences Library, responds quickly to the call with a full range of services.

The WSMA's program has been underway for barely four months; its reception has been most favorable. Its second month generated more than 200 requests—over and above those requests serviced directly by the three larger county society programs. At the end of four months the service had provided WSMA members with more than 310 searches and photocopied more than 1,500 articles—again in addition to the local society activities. Our goal is to seek maximum cost benefit on the local scene; operationally this is what is occurring. Simultaneously we are investigating how an individual physician (or groups of physicians) can best integrate this service into his current practice so as to respond to his continuing education needs. For our first year, the program is being conducted on a budget of less than \$30,000—less than \$8 per member per year. At present future funding alternatives—adding a service fee

plus participation by community hospitals—are under study. WSMA's goal is to combine our individual member's dollars with those of larger institutions and organizations *and* with tax dollars to maximize access to up-to-date knowledge for each and every physician in the state. The potential for enhanced learning and improved patient care is enormous—all at minimal cost and located in the physician's own community.

A spin-off of this program has brought medical library services to our sister state of Montana and its higher education system. The collection of the King County Medical Society's library that was originally put in storage has now been sold via the assistance of the Washington/Alaska Regional Medical Program to Montana State University in Bozeman at a relatively low cost. Once the books were on hand, Montana State University was able to accrue \$50,000 of support from the State of Montana and \$50,000 of support from the federal government to build a Health Sciences Library as part of Montana State University—which eventually will service the needs of health care providers throughout that state.

Little doubt exists that the "networking" of health information services will become more and more crucial to all health care providers throughout our region. Certainly, most physicians ought to be able to satisfy their information needs with local resources; this is mandatory—but no community is able to be 100 percent independent in our one "world of medicine." Sharing of information resources is the road to the future. A combination of resources now serves to provide for better services than were available a scant decade ago. Still additional dollar resources will be needed to maintain the system. Obviously, the basic elements of the system are likely to continue to be supported by existing resources, but many involved foresee charging individual users on a minimal "fee-for-service" to create the greatest possible efficiency and effectiveness for the system. In addition to supporting the network, such arrangement would assure users some control of the overall process. The physicians in the State of Washington have assumed the leadership in bringing this evolutionary program about; we would encourage others to consider the approach.

#### REFERENCES

1. Von Bruck M: A new medical library consortium in Tacoma, Washington. Hospitals (In Press)
2. Cummings MM: *Your National Library of Medicine*. JAMA 233:1359-1361, Sep 1975